

8-18-2005

# It was enjoyable doing whatever you wanted

Leyla Safavi

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Safavi, Leyla, "It was enjoyable doing whatever you wanted" (2005). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact [ritscholarworks@rit.edu](mailto:ritscholarworks@rit.edu).

*“it was enjoyable doing whatever you wanted”*

*“ it was enjoyable doing whatever you wanted”*

by  
*leyla safavi*

*submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of masters of fine arts in imaging arts*

*rochester institute of technology*



*Jeff Weiss, Chair*

**J. Weiss**

*Elliott Rubenstein, committee advisor*

**Elliott Rubenstein**

*Jessica Liebermann, committee advisor*

**Jessica Liebermann**

I, **Leyla Safavi** hereby deny permission to the RIT Library of the  
Rochester Institute of Technology to reproduce my print thesis or dissertation in whole or  
in part.

Signature of Author: **L. S.**

Date: **8.18.05**

*I would like to thank*

*My parents and Lida*

*Ariya and Susana*

*Jams and Blaue Augen*

*Brian*

*Aki, Kristin, Bill, Dean, Smitty, Mr. Jordan, Lee and Kara Canal*

*Muhsen Gharabaghlo*

*Kevin Lamark (an unbelievable human being)*

*Elliott and Jessica*

*Judy Levy*

*and*

*The amazing Jeff Weiss*

I have always thought that is my responsibility to make others feel better. A mixture of my hospitable Persian culture and my mother's overly friendly personality, I have always felt obligated to entertain people and make sure they are having "fun" in my company. I approach my art-making the same way. Despite my interest in controversial subjects such as hypocrisy, religion, politics, violence and war, in my graduate work, my goal has been to approach such subject matters with humor and tried to avoid any insults or vulgarity. I have tried to camouflage the serious with levity— an oscillation between comical and upsetting.

One cannot say a work of art is "about" something; it is a result. A work of art is a product of an idea, our feelings, curiosities and interests. In regard to the visual arts, I believe "meaning" is relative and subjective; therefore, I will address the process of my work rather than its meaning. This paper documents my experiences in producing a body of work. My thesis exhibition included one collage, two photographs and four videos (one with sound), all reflecting my interest in and indeed obsession with religion. This work is not necessarily "about" religion. It is a product, an outcome of my curiosity, research, and interest on this subject. I have always been interested in religion, in its doctrine and its transliteration into the everyday life. In particular I am interested in hypocrisy in the context of religion, not simply in terms of moral criticism of this trait but also in its original Greek inflection: *hypocrisies*, which means "to speak in a dialogue" or "to act a part."

Hypocrites are like actors, pretending to be what they are not. In this sense, I am also interested in the notion of reality in terms of self-identity. Do "we" have a clear awareness of our real self? How does my unconscious self fit within the hypocrisy of society and politics? My purpose in my work is not to criticize but to understand hypocrisy. I put myself in front of the camera because I believed "I" needed to see within myself in order to understand about the outside world.

My work is an impulsive response to my experiences. I do not want my artwork to be about my characterization of religion, or to convey any specific ideology or theory. My work conveys my interest in religion rather than my doubt, or cynical views of religion. The inseparability of hypocrisy, dishonesty, religion and doubt has existed since man first began to worship. The birth of philosophy for example, was the origin of doubt, when people started to think, rather than to accept handed- down traditions based on faith.

I am interested in making emotionally illogical pictures; I believe that my experimentation with the complexities of “illogic” gives the viewer more of an opportunity for multiple readings rather than a confrontation with my opinions. Illogical pictures can be more provocative, where as a work of art with too direct of a message limits the possibility of other interpretations.

Look at Thomas Kinkade, “ America’s most collected artist.” His “*work of art*” is finished. There is little or no room for the viewer’s imagination. The spectator is confronted with a work that can only be liked or disliked without any further possibility for provocation. On the other hand, the Japanese art star Takashi Murakami for example, although easily dismissible as a politically motivated artist due to his simple, “super flat” images of cute Japanese comic book characters, conveys and inspires more curiosity and imagination, because his images do not initially make any sense. In his show titled “Little boy” for example, is he commenting on the World War II and America’s bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Sometimes there is more to Hello Kitty. <sup>1</sup>

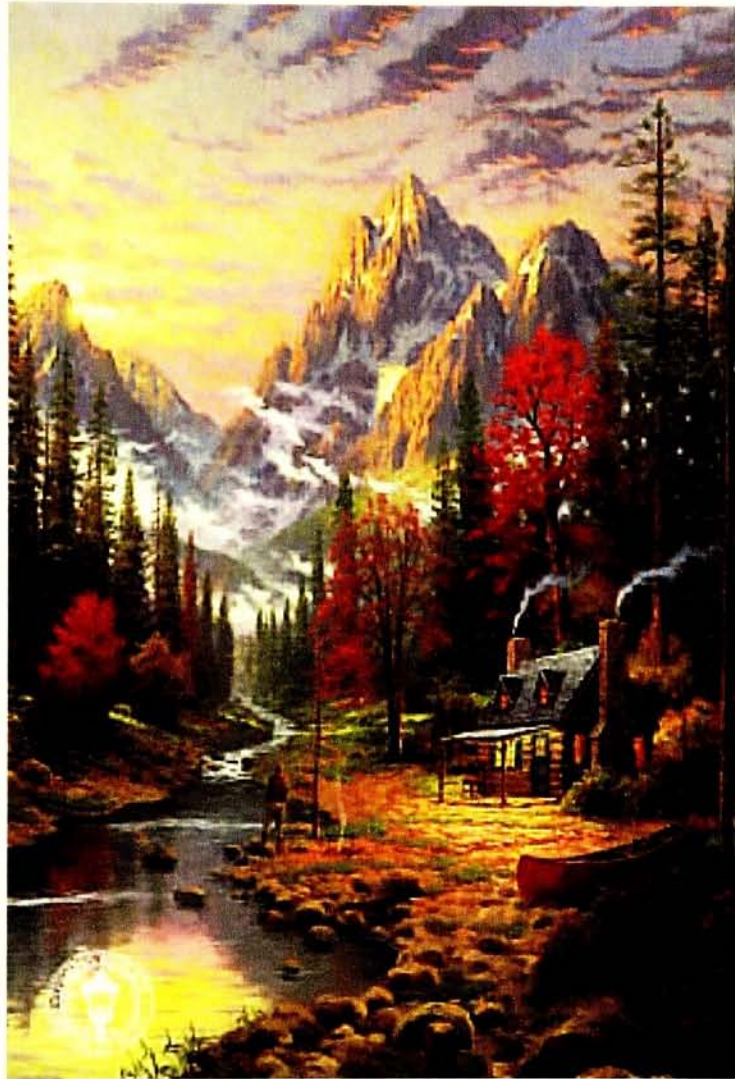
In the introduction to *the world of Jeffery Vallance*, David Hickey wrote:

“ From the stain in Blinky’s shroud Vallance is led to Turin. From the rent in the Shroud of Turin, he is led to the relics of the Holy Lance in Vienna. Through close examination of the enigmatic stains on Turin’s shroud he discovers apocalyptic clowns, and, in the dried blood of Christ, he

---

<sup>1</sup> The emotion less hello kitty without a mouth does not suggest sadness or happiness but what ever you want her to be for you,





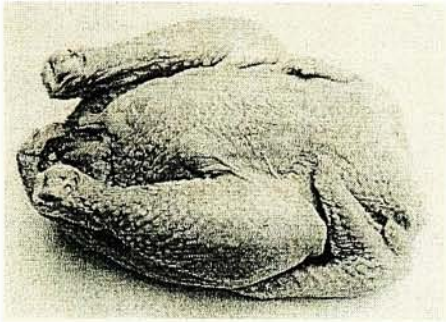
Thomas Kinkade



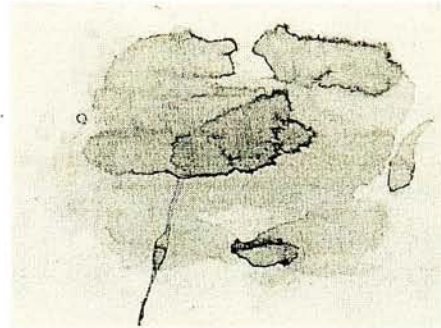


Takashi Murakami

finds the profile of George Washington, which leads him back to the book of Revelation, and onward to the mythology of America's patriarch..."



Here is a close-up view of Blinky.



I too believe in the "interrelatedness of almost everything." Like our lives or stories, one thing leads to another. I started working with small plastic Jesus night-lamps, which I had found in a dollar store. I bought hundreds of these lamps and photographed them. I was interested in the humor of the "plastic Jesus lamp," an inexpensive, night-light that brightens the path, perhaps to the bathroom or kitchen, in the middle of a dark night. Also, for a while, I continued to be interested in the commoditization of faith (which to me seems hypocritical). The lamp's phallic shape led me to study religious dogma on sexuality. From there I learned about the Christian (Catholic) monks who take the vow of celibacy. This in turn, fueled my interest in monasteries and monks. I visited a few monasteries and stayed in one for several weeks. There, secretly, I became acquainted with one of the monks. At the monastery I started to assume different roles: an artist, a seductress, a devoted believer on retreat and an atheist. I became interested in playing roles. Soon I began to realize some of the monks were assuming certain roles as well, some were only "acting" as monks.

Working on my thesis show, I was primarily interested in my abilities as an "artist," not in my camera work or techniques but my life and body as instruments. I wanted to transform



Untitled. 2003



### Monks at Mt. Saviour Monastery

Photo by Fr. Nathan Munsch

This is a post card I found. The monks in this picture have no relevance to my thesis or my work



everything— my thoughts, interests, interactions, sexuality, and fears into my art. I wanted everything to be my art: one continuous performance. I was interested in life as “performance” where my everyday life would be art rather than life acting as inspiration for the art. Could my work be a mirror in which I would see my flaws, hypocrisy and fears, before I could comment on the outside world? I decided to put myself before the camera to show that what I am commenting on (hypocrisy, illusion, seduction...) is what I am also part of: the illusion of “self” beside the reality of “I”. The “I” that I imagined to know or want to be, is not necessarily what it is in reality or in it’s unconscious— not an impostor but rather an unaware act or innocent superficiality.

My videos are staged and superficial because I believe all human interactions are mostly superficial. Our photo albums for instance: they are full of images of happy and smiling relatives and friends, however we rarely remember the events as being the pure pleasure that their recording would suggest. Did everyone just act for the occasion? Did they assume the characters of happy uncles or thrilled grandpas? Were they aware of their role-playing? In our daily interaction with others, we assume a certain role and act it. Every person we meet, consciously or not, is engaged in a performance. We perform as students or as parents; we perform as teachers or priests. Intentionally or not, we “perform” our lives. I am interested in the roles we play. I once saw a woman with her crying little son, mesmerized by a Richard Prince painting, ignoring the little crying boy hanging from her skirt, while lifelessly staring at the canvas. How is this possible? How does Richard Prince have this power? Or does he? Or was she performing?

My videos are abstractedly enactments of “real” experiences or situations in which I had to “perform”. Women artists have a long tradition of role-playing in their work— it seems they try to play, for their art, a role that was denied to them in society.<sup>2</sup> However, in my work I was drawn

---

<sup>2</sup> For example: The Guerrilla Girls group of the 1980's: their posters were plastered around New York City on billboards and buildings, it read: "Do women have to be naked to get in to the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern art section are women, but 85% of the nudes are female."

to the possibility and the “reality” of my character in real life. When do I act and when is my “reality” an act?

In my video titled “ *it was nice meeting you*” I hold a smile for about twenty-five minutes. After a while, the face muscles hurtfully start to shake, eventually it looks as if I am crying or screaming from pain and agony rather than enjoying the joyous and happy laughter that I began with. At one point I stop, take a breath, and start smiling again. The video is simply shot and has no sound. It is lit with natural window light in my apartment. I started thinking about making this video while I was making a painting and a video in response to my distress over the political situation in and outside of the United States (That work is titled “ *giografia de la wert*”). “ *It was nice meeting you*” is loosely based on a true story. When I first came to the States, I did not speak English, I decided to get a job in order to learn English faster. The only place that seemed fun was the Disney store at the mall. I did not have any work experience. I had just arrived from Iran and only knew a few words of English. They decided the position suitable for me was to greet people at the door. They told me “ just smile.” In Iran we do not smile without a reason. Generally, when you enter a store, nobody says “hi” to you. The person behind the counter is either staring into the air or reading the morning newspaper. They are not disrespectful but, rather “real”. They do not pretend to be thrilled to see you. I left the Disney after a week. My face would hurt every evening after work. I was forced to smile all day. I could not accept the forced and the fake happy attitude of the store. However, the Disney experience became a good metaphor, a rosy façade that hides the truth. A camouflage. The Disney store was similar to a monastery, similar to a church, even similar to our politics and politicians. The pretense of truth and happiness: this front hides the ugly truth all around us. Our politics, for example, are a façade of democracy and honesty, a camouflage for self-promoting cowards and charlatans who use religion and morality to advance themselves and their causes with lies and half truths which eventually anesthetize the public.





"It was nice to meet you" 2004  
Photo by Lee

My videos are generally a repetition of a phrase or a task. In repeating, as Andy Warhol would say, the meaning goes away. As a result, there is an interesting state of boredom, mindlessness and almost emptiness, which I feel, happens with prayer and religion in general. This state of emotional detachment and the emotional emptiness is a result of machine-like repetition that takes away feelings and leaves only a routine, a task.

Societies have changed, technologies have advanced, human beings have evolved, yet religion and its perception have not. Despite the Vatican II<sup>3</sup> for Catholics or adjustments and modifications in other religions, we essentially read the same books and believe in the same ideas as our ancestors did hundreds of years ago. Mark Twain once said: “ the Christian Bible is a drug store. Its contents remain the same; but the medical practice changes”. (Mark Twain 1973: 108) In our modern time people die for religion as they had in the dark ages. Religion has hypnotic powers. By justifying the means for the end, religion can order destruction of any kind without repentance. The repeated tradition, anesthetizes the mind. Similar to what Andy Warhol did to his audience, he hypnotized the world. Suddenly the electric chair or an image of a car crash became nonchalant enough to become wallpaper or to be hung above someone’s couch. He became a machine and mesmerized his audience. His repeated soup cans and electrical chairs essentially meant the same thing to his viewers. No one felt badly for the car crash victims or felt good about the soup can’s potential contents. The repetition takes away their meaning.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II marked a fundamental shift toward the modern Church. Pope John XXIII and bishops from all over the world (2,450 bishops attended) sought to define the nature and mission of the Church. Although the basic doctrines of the Church did not change, the decisions of the Council, especially those regarding the liturgy, affected the lives of Catholics around the world.

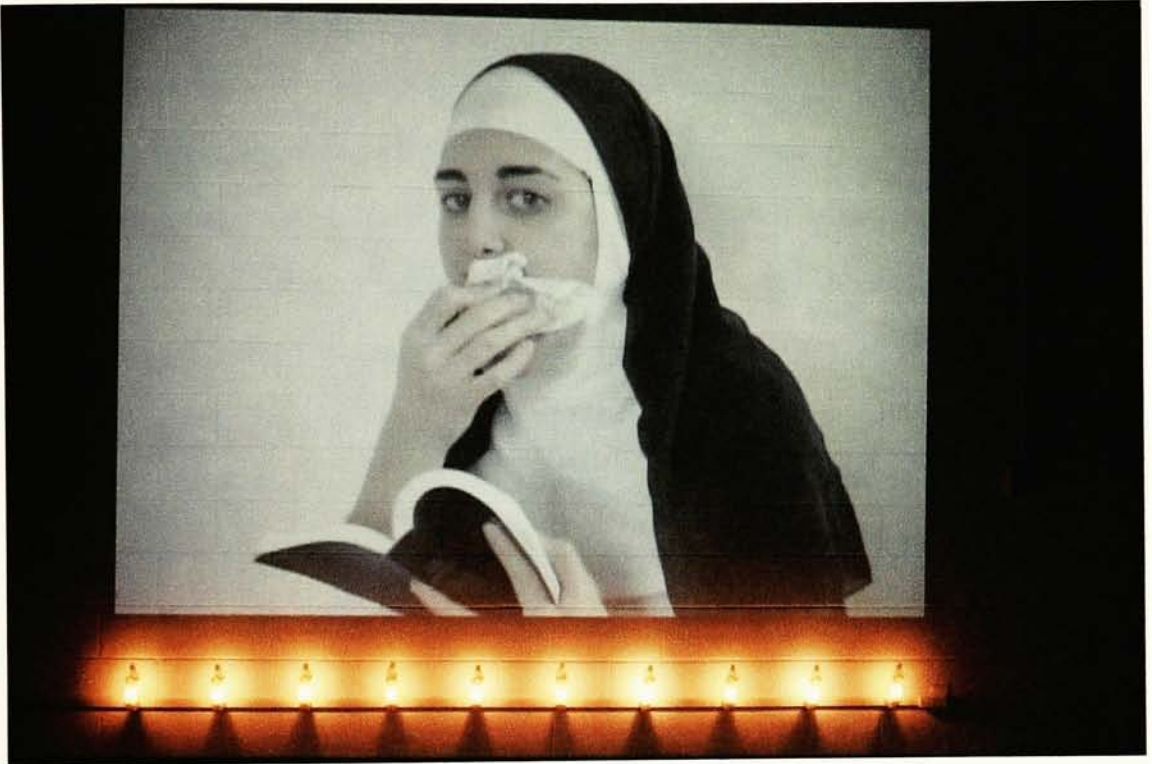


The observer becomes emotionally numb and feels empty in viewing them. Monks for example, for their entire monastic life, which for some might be more than fifty years, study the same books, pray to the same song and obey the same Abbot. This machine-like routine, I believe, creates mindlessness, bewilderment and emptiness.

In my work I try to take away the meaning. By using repetition, I strive to create emptiness. Repetition causes emptiness because all the associations are gone and the image becomes merely the physical act. Emotionally, the physical act becomes pure and empty, but merely mindlessness. In a humorous video of a nun eating pages of the Bible, I have tried to portray such routine. As she eats the pages of the bible, her eyes move around without looking at anything in particular, as if she is blindly taking orders. She looks as if she is not even aware of the task she is involved in. She is emotionless— simply a machine.

As one person told me during my show all my videos maybe considered “ boring,” There may be some truth in that statement (She did not know I was the “artist”). However, as John Cage said, everything becomes interesting if we spend enough time with it. I believe in viewing art, our own stories are more important to our interpretive understanding and reaction than the actual work and its “meaning.” Although it seems that nothing happens in these videos, in viewing them, I believe something does occur. The videos become more interesting because of the audiences’ own stories. For example, in a conversation with a German professor, I was thrilled to





Bible 2005  
Photo by Lee

hear his experience in viewing my "*No, I am not Jewish*" video. This video was projected in a dark and cold room in a basement of a building. He told me that as a German he was in tears looking at the woman repeatedly saying "no, I am not Jewish." In that dark, cold and somewhat industrial and impersonal room, he felt the woman begging him for forgiveness as if he, "this German," was responsible for her freedom or death. He told me he stood there for more than half an hour, staring at the screen. I did not do any extraordinary cinematic or artistic magic in making that video, it is a simple ten minutes of this repeated line: "No, I am not Jewish." This video is shot straight forward with natural light. Here, my intentions and feelings as an artist are irrelevant. What is important to me is that my audience brought its own stories to my work and was able to respond to what was in front of it. I believe I was successful in leaving some room for my viewers' imagination in completing the work. The "German" and his feelings and experiences completed my work for him. Perhaps an American, a Jewish woman or a Korean man would complete this work differently. My work would not have a "meaning" if my German professor for example did not have a story of his own.

Art and religion are comparable when one views them in terms of hypocrisy and illogic. I am interested in religion, because like art it has a power to alter our sense of reality. Religion can be hypocritical and melodramatic. Art and religion confront us with our powerlessness and vulnerability. I am drawn to Catholicism because of its theatrical and dramatic culture and rituals. Catholicism has affected or inspired some of the greatest masterpieces of art. Art has helped to shape our understanding of religion as well as stimulating the viewers' religious sensibilities.<sup>4</sup> There is an ongoing codependency between art and religion. Going back to the caves (if we agree to call the cave paintings art) the Greeks, Egyptians, Romans to the Medieval, Baroque, Rococo and Renaissance, religion depended on art for its survival and glorification of its God(s).

---

<sup>4</sup> Specially Crucifixion and carrying the cross.



no, I am not Jewish 2004  
Photo by Lee



Meanwhile art needed religion for its purpose. Religion also has been threatened by art and has been opposed to it. In early Muslim and Jewish traditions, image making, especially sculpting the human figure, was forbidden. Muslims as well as Jews and some Christians believe that by “creating” a realistic replica of the human figure one is imitating God; therefore it should be banned. Muslims still do not pray in front of an image or statues. For centuries, Dutch artists have been criticized by the Catholic Church for their overly realistic representations of the human body; for it was believed that they would harm the viewers by “arousing strong sexual feelings” in them. Michelangelo was also criticized for the nude figures in the Last Judgment, and his nude images of Venus often were considered “filthy and obscene.” In 1545 the Council of Trent<sup>5</sup> published a “guideline for sacred art.” It warned against unchaste subjects in art (often biblical stories) such as David and Bathsheba. Ironically, the biblical reference of the paintings often legitimized nudity, and presented scenes that would normally be forbidden (Lot and his daughters)<sup>6</sup>.

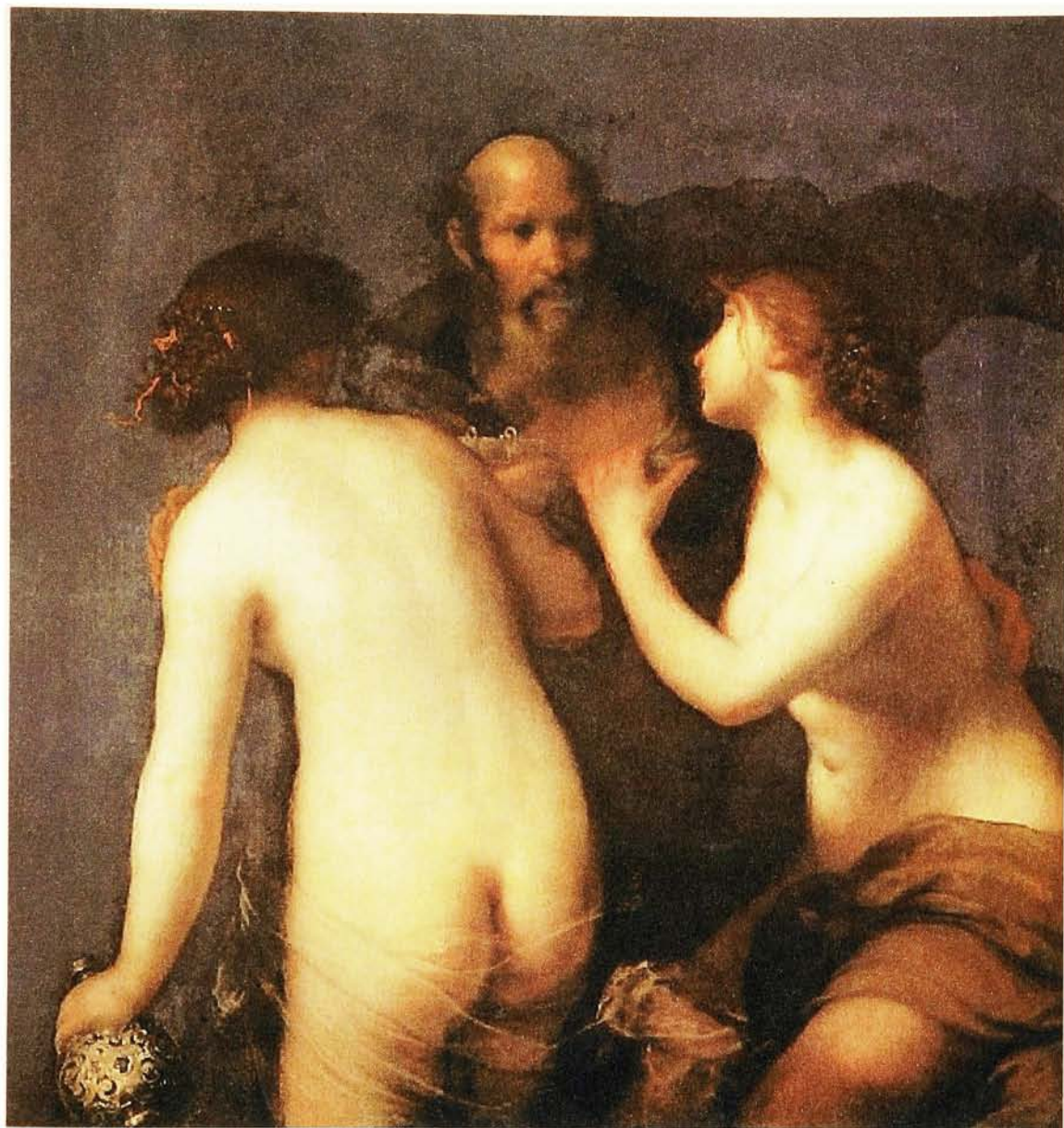
For example, the sexual history of Saint Mary Magdalene as a prostitute had enabled sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists to portray a sensuous woman (often used as “pin-ups”) that has been legitimized by its religious context. Art and religion as institutions have the power to legitimize the forbidden. They both have the power to hypnotically alter our reality. A rather easy example would be the clichéd image of Christ, which is a tall blond man. It is an image, which has been painted by commissioned European painters for churches or private patrons. However, Jesus as a Middle Eastern man genetically would be more realistic as a short olive skinned Jew.

Religion often creates contradictions, double standards and confusing facts. Religion can create complexity, anxiety, fear, anger, destruction, death, war and hypocrisy. Even in our modern time

---

<sup>5</sup> The Council of Trent was established to reform the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>6</sup> Lot and his daughters fled the sinful city of Sodom after being warned of its destruction by God. The daughters later seduced their father in order to ensure the survival of his line. Taken from the Old Testament (Genesis 19: 30)



*Lot and his Daughters Titian*





Mary Magdalene. Titian



religion causes disease, crime and death among people. It creates hypocritical or rather preposterous attitudes in dealing with personal and social issues. For example, in 1831 the Magdalen Society of New York in its first annual issue reported, "approximately ten thousand women earned their livings as public prostitutes, and another ten thousand were private or part-time prostitutes." However because of its refusal to inform the public about the sexual immorality of the city, the church allowed the citizens to believe that the city did not have any prostitution problem. And if it did, it only belonged to the slums. This allowed men and women of all classes to engage in any form of illegal sex without any fear of being arrested and shamed in public. In general religious institutions have especially been unfair to women. For example, in the Middle Ages the north side of the church was believed to be the side of darkness and devil, it was associated with "the gentiles." Women generally were seated in the north side, because they too were associated with evil, negative and darkness.

I realized that my irony-oriented personality and cynical views need to be contrasted against the potential possibility of purity and human goodness that religion can bring. It seems that the more doubts I have about religion and its honesty, the more decidedly I need an affinity to it. Hoping to find purity I was looking for imperfections. Then I decided to put to test my distrustful feelings toward religion and pursue my genuine desire to find human purity in the context of religious practice.

In my bookshelves one would find books such as, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, *First generation of Lesbian Rabbis*, *Catholic Girls' Guide to Sex* and many other odd religious books that I have collected. I surround myself with these books and Jesus and Mary figurines, newspaper clippings of unusual religious news and small bibles. Religion, which I criticize and associate with hypocrisy and control, mindlessness and the illusions of purity, nevertheless controls my life. My obsession with and criticism of religion, my devotion to collect religious



relics and the compulsion to learn about religion, ironically places me in a vulnerable confrontation with my adversary. While my cynical side collects books such as *The X-rated Bible* I also find myself reading *The Rules of St. Benedict*. I fantasize about being a nun or a saint as well as wondering about the thrill of a mischievous prostitute or a stripper. This oscillation between “good” and “bad” and my symbolic ideal of “self” – the tension of contradictory signals of seduction and repulsion are the truth of my unconscious “self” and the subject of my work.

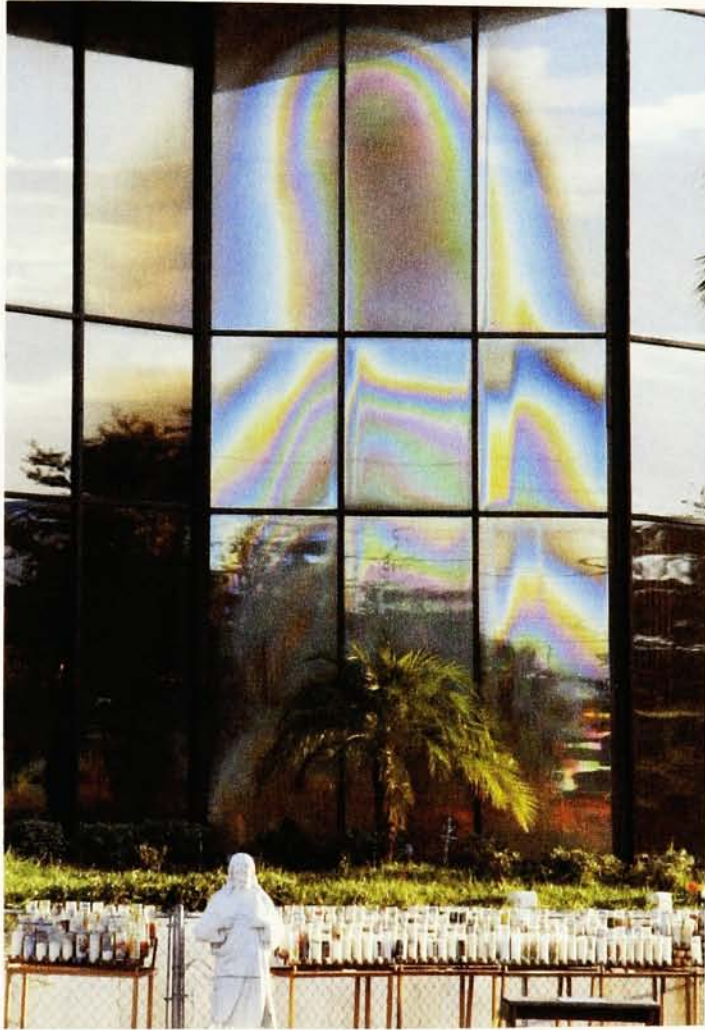
In quest of “purity and honesty” in religion, to learn about what interests me in religion, monasticism and sexuality and to find a direction with my artwork, I decided to visit monasteries. Monks have been my idols of perfection, unlike priests or missionaries they completely remove themselves from society and its distractions to focus on the teachings of Christ. In their simple meditations on God, they believe god is in everything. Monks’ notion of God is similar to John Cage’s idea of music<sup>7</sup>. Monks too contemplate on life in general: sweeping floors, picking apples or studying a religious text have equal importance in a monk’s life; everything he does helps him to improve. They do not travel far to see miracles: such as an appearance of Virgin Mary on a window or a crying statue of Christ in a remote village. Our ability to talk, think and see, our existence – to monks, life is a miracle.

Staying at one monastery, gave me a chance to secretly perform. I worked within a parameter of question I had set up for myself while I was at the monastery. Would I be able to seduce a monk in a monastery? Would I be able to gain the monks’ trust in the same community? Would I be able to believably act as a virgin a pure virtuous girl as well as a seductive and mischievous woman? Ironically, I have realized that generally the image of a female historically has been painted, photographed, played or written about as a virgin (mother, devoted housewife, etc),

---

<sup>7</sup> Cage believed wherever we go what we mostly hear is noise, “sound of a truck” or “static between radio stations”– Cage captured and controlled these noises and used them as musical instruments.





Apparition of the Virgin Mary on the side of an office Building, Clearwater Florida 1990



prostitute or a beggar (peasants). Do we (women) have a virgin, a beggar and a prostitute in us? If so, which am I? Can I be all?

My video performances that followed by the monastery experience where conceptually reenactments of my performances at the monastery. In a video titled *Bread* I hold a loaf of bread as if it was a child, while nursing the bread my breasts show through my dress. In this video my intent was to portray the historical image of women as either Madonna or whore. It also is a reenactment of my own experience at the monastery where I performed as a virtuous catholic and a seductress.

My large collage titled “ *it was enjoyable doing whatever you wanted*” was also inspired by my visit to the monastery. It was a response to initial feeling I had about the isolated attitude of the monastery. There in the peaceful mountains of New York, surrounded by hills, rivers and farms, monks devotedly pray to Christ. I felt that monks have turned their backs to the reality of our unjust world and are hidden in their perfect world of denial, while religious wars kill hundreds of people every day. In the collage prayers are congregated around three women holding different images of Christ, while people around them including Christ are being tortured.

At the monastery I would be performing for an audience who was not aware of my act; so this would give me the freedom to play as I wished without any feedback or obligation. I could put my interests masochistically in tension with one another. Where I truly hoped to find perfection I would be certain to find the stereotypical hypocrisy in person. At the prayers I acted as a devoted Catholic, I attended every prayer starting before dawn. I read the Psalms, I sang the hymns, and I gained the monks' trust. However when I was alone with the monks I tried to be seductive and naughty. As an artist I was performing the entire time, I was not simply Leyla who appeared before them, but a catholic; yet not any catholic, but one on her way to becoming a nun, a virgin in a spiritual retreat. My intention was not to fool a group of monks. I wanted to perform among them, and to act like a nun and a virgin, who devote their bodies and thoughts to God. This was the only way I could experience the true attitude of the devout religious beings with one another. I



Bread. 2005  
Photo by Lee





"it was enjoyable doing whatever you wanted" 2005

wanted the monks to consider me as a religious soul. I was interested to see how they would play their role and interact with a “woman”. In this way I was eager to learn about my abilities, my boundaries, and myself. I also wanted to understand contradiction, hypocrisy and devotion.

*Black Veil* is another photograph that was inspired by my visit to the monastery. Where I learned and somewhat understood the difficulties and challenges that monks face in order to achieve spiritual perfection. In this photograph a woman is exposing her breasts while her head and face are covered with a black veil. She is covered and also is surrounded with black. Because of the large black area that encloses the figure this picture becomes a mirror for viewer, and the viewer in return, become part of the image. With this image instead of critically commenting on the issue of hypocrisy as an outsider, I wanted to look at the possibility of our own image reflected in front of us. Standing in front of this picture, I wanted my viewer to not only see an image but to become part of it to see the possibility of our own weakness.

I play different roles in my work. I like the act of seduction as part of the art process. I am not great at socializing, talking or explaining my ideas. I am afraid of people, especially those who know me. Video gives me the freedom to play without any fear. I am attracted to strangers because meeting them gives me a chance to play a role. I can be a different person. I can play a different role each time I meet a new person. For those who know me, I have a fixed identity. But for strangers, I can explore a greater versatility of my “self”. I like to explore and realize the possibilities of my identity, where it can go, who it can become. Can I play or can I truly transform in to a prostitute, a nun, a stripper, a scholar, or a feminist? I wanted to become the roles that I adopted. Orlan for example has been transforming herself literally through a variety of surgeries for decades, once as St. Orlan after Bernini’s St. Teresa in Ecstasy. Her work has focused on the traditional hypocritical way that society divides the female image between Madonna and whore. In the monastery performance project, for example, the constant oscillation



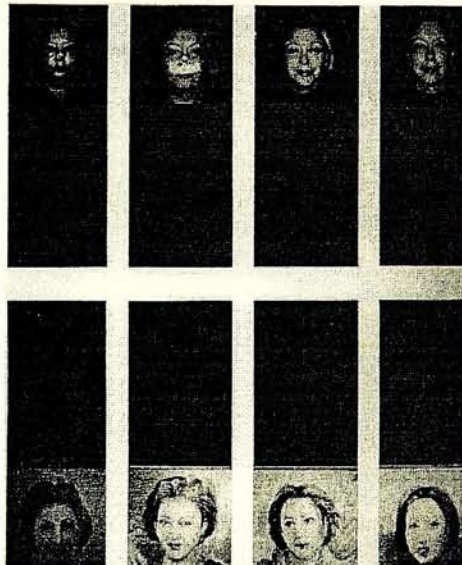


Black Veil. 2005



Orlan

between sacred and malefic, illusion and reality, levity and seriousness became a theme that I wanted to explore in my work and myself.



I like corruption and religious scandals. News of priests abusing children or a gay bishop found with a man in a church excites me because it confirms my belief that religious ideals can never work in reality the way it is written in the books (I do feel bad for the children though). At the monastery I realized I had never personally been confronted with hypocrisy before. I was surprised, saddened and disappointed when for example, my new monk friend told me, that he often masturbates right before the mass. It offended me. Not because I believe masturbation is a mortal sin. I was saddened because it was too easy to be human. My symbol of purity was no longer there. While I did not believe in the concept of perfection the way religion idealizes, deep down I wanted it to be true. I had hoped to witness the strength of an ideal human being capable

of total goodness and spiritual perfection, even though I myself do not believe in the core of that promised religious excellence.

I observed several monks' lives in a relatively short period of time. My involvement however went beyond my studies, allowing me to know them personally. I started to know them as John, Dominique and James instead of brother John, etc. This meant I got to know a monk and a guy, who played the role of a monk. I knew performers.

Why would one voluntarily choose the difficult communal life of a monastery, yet secretly break the rules? Why volunteer celibacy? Why violate ones self-imposed restrictions? I would never truly find out why they became monks even though they gave me reasons: one was a military surgeon in Vietnam, one a former member of a New Jersey Mob family, another one an architect from Cuba. They left their families and jobs to join the monastery's simple life style. They had vowed to a life of celibacy, poverty and obedience to Christ, and perhaps to denial.

Because of the monastery's restrictions I was not able to record my visit. Although I could have done that secretly, I decided not to. I wanted to remember the event without any evidence. I wanted to find out how this experience and its memory would affect my mind and beliefs. Although I was interested in "now" and what was happening at the time, I was more interested in how I would use this experience in my art. In the future, I may even doubt its occurrence if it becomes a faded memory. For the time being I consider this experience an important piece of my graduate studies and like to cherish it. This experience will continue to inspire me.

Art frightens me. Unlike many people, making art never comforts me or bring peace to my life. It only adds anxiety, frustration and fear to my otherwise routine eventless life. Yet nothing makes me happier than when I have a good idea for a new project. I am always curious to see what is labeled as art and how and when we trust its creator enough to call them an "artist". I like the hypocrisy and the pretentiousness that art generates. When do we consider someone's acts and ideas as art? Why something is "art" and other things are "not art"? I find it amusing



when the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibits Jacky Kennedy's nightgowns and thereby transforming them into works of art. Or when Damien Hirst signs the fake Picasso prints and they become "original" Hirst's, therefore "original art"? Or Jasper Johns' behind the scene story of creation of his famous beer can sculptures. He said:

"I was doing at that time sculptures of small objects—flashlights and light bulbs. Then I heard a story about Willem de Kooning. He was annoyed with my dealer, Leo Castelli, for some reason, and said something like, that son-of-a bitch; you could give him two beer cans and he could sell them, I heard this and thought, what a sculpture—two beer cans. It seemed to me to fit perfectly in with what I was doing, so I did them and Leo sold them".

Like religion, art as an institute can be fantastical, hypocritical and pretentious. What is real *in reason*, does not exist. In actuality, religion and art are ambiguous notions, yet to the faithful it is worth dying for. Van Gogh wrote in 1880s "painting is a faith". (Kuspit, 2004: 143) He believed in art and committed himself to it entirely – he believed in art to be more valuable than life and worth dying for. With faith possibilities are endless; anything can be art, someone needs to label it, declare that it is art and we will believe it. The best thing about art is that no one has to explain it, like religion it only requires faith. However for a doubter, it is difficult to induce an untrained viewer to believe in— for example, Wim Delvoye's tattooed pigs as art. Damien Hirst in a interview with Gordon Burn explain his mother's reaction to his work titled *medicine-cabinet*; he said:

"I'd been trying to explain loads of work to my mum, about what I'd been doing. She is an open-minded person, but she had a completely closed mind about it. Well, what is it for? And there was no way of explaining it. And I was with my mum in the chemist's: she was getting a prescription, and it was, like, complete trust on the one level in something she's equally in the

dark about... My mum was looking at the same kind of stuff in the chemist's and believing in it completely, and then, when looking at it in an art gallery, completely not believing it."

Andy Warhol has a recipe for his favorite chocolate cake that goes like this:

*You take some chocolate, and you take two pieces of bread...and you put the candy in the middle and you make a sandwich of it, and that would be cake.* I want to make art that is as light hearted as making this particular chocolate cake. But what I really envy is the faith that this two-piece of bread and some chocolate is actually going to become a chocolate cake. What we know of the chocolate cake is far from this recipe yet if *one* believes it, this two-piece of bread and a candy in the middle becomes their chocolate cake. I envy those artists who simplify with little logic and have a strong faith. For me art making is horrifying.

## Bibliography

- Hecht, Jennifer Michael. *Doubt: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*. New York HarperCollins, 2003
- Vallance, Jeffery. *The world of Jeffery Valance: Collected Writing*. Art Issues Press, 1994
- Warhol, Andy. *The philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to Z and back again*. Harvest Books, 1977
- Twain, Mark. *Mark Twain and the Three R's: Race, Religion, Revolution and Related Matters*. Macmillan Publishing, 1973
- Muizelaar, Klaske. *Picturing Men and Women in Dutch Golden Age: Painting People in Historical Perspective*. Yale University, 2003
- Mullins, Edwin B. *The Painted Witch: How Western Artist Have Viewed The Sexuality of Women*. Carroll Graf, 1985
- Katz, Melissa R. *Divine Mirrors: The virgin Mary in The visual Arts*. Oxford University Press, 2001
- Kuspit, Donald. *The End of Art*. Cambridge University, 2004
- St. Benedict. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. Vintage; Reprint edition, 1998
- Selz, Peter Howard. *Theories and Document of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*. University of California, 1996
- Burn, Gordon. *One the Way to Work*. Universe, 2002